

October 28, 2022

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The History of Women's Jails in New York City: An Argument for Why the Women's Center for Justice Should Not Open

On June 28, 2022, Columbia Justice Lab, The Legal Aid Society, and former New York City Board of Correction members and Department of Correction leaders gave joint testimony before the New York City Council in support of transforming the closed Lincoln Correctional Facility in Harlem into the Women's Center for Justice (WCJ). WCJ would be part of the borough-based jail plan, which is facilitating the closure of Rikers Island, and would serve as the new jail for women and gender-expansive people. Its architects claim that nonprofits and staff with a "social work mindset" would primarily operate the facility.¹ WCJ would also use a "gender-responsive approach," have flexible family visiting hours, and provide each incarcerated person with an "individualized care plan."² Despite these promises, countless activists, academics, and Harlem community members oppose WCJ. Over 900 people, including Angela Davis, signed an open letter that claims WCJ would be as oppressive, violent, and inhumane as the former women's jail on Rikers Island.³ History offers a crucial perspective on this debate. Within the span of 56 years, New York City replaced its women's jail three times. It opened the Women's House of Detention in 1932, the Correctional Institution for Women in 1971, and the Rose M. Singer Center in 1988. The City promoted each jail as a humane, modern institution that centered rehabilitation, and the press largely endorsed this narrative. However, each jail soon became riddled with problems and abhorrent conditions, causing the City to close and replace it. History teaches the modern observer that promises for a humane women's jail with progressive programming in New York City have always remained unfulfilled. By tracking the rise and fall of the City's preceding women's jails, it becomes evident that the hopes for WCJ will, more likely than not, also go unrealized.

In May 1932, New York City replaced the Jefferson Market Prison with the \$2 million Women's House of Detention (WHD), which the press heralded as a progressive and humane women's jail. *The New York Times* (*The Times*) covered the opening of WHD in a 1932 article with the subheading: "New York's Model Prison: Blocks of Light, Airy Rooms, Replace the Old Cells and Many Other Prison Innovations are Introduced."⁴ *The Times* immediately conveys to its reader that WHD is an innovative approach to incarceration that other jurisdictions should replicate. The subheading also marks WHD as an immense improvement from Jefferson Market's jail by juxtaposing the inhumane "cells" of Jefferson Market with the seemingly large, light-filled "rooms" of WHD.⁵ The article's text expanded on this contrast:

In the old Jefferson Market jail the cells were steeped in a dungeon gloom, and were so narrow that no cot more than two-feet wide could be put in them... in the new institution there are no cells. They are called rooms, and rightly so... [the size is] not much smaller than many bedrooms in boarding houses. Each has a window looking out on the street. This window is not barred... the doors, unlike the ordinary cell doors, are made of wood... This arrangement ensures to the inmate the utmost privacy.⁶

While *The Times* compared the old jail to a dark, depressing, and suffocatingly small dungeon, it compared WHD to a home. In WHD, incarcerated women lived in private, appropriately sized bedrooms with regular doors and windows. These uniquely unbarred windows provided women with visual access to the outside world and a sense of freedom. WHD's conditions were so nice and homey that *The Times* suggested its women would not feel like they were in a jail. Rather, being incarcerated in WHD would be like living in a boarding house.

WHD further claimed to use its architectural features and dress code to center its incarcerated population's humanity. The City had architects design WHD to look like an apartment building rather than a jail. With its 10 stories and red-brick exterior, WHD blended into the surrounding buildings of Greenwich Village.⁷ The City sought to reduce stigma and treat its incarcerated population like its free citizens by housing them in similarly designed

buildings. According to *The Times*, WHD's architecture was "the result of as much thought on modern penology that... the architects could bear. It is the first of its kind in the country and may serve for the guidance of other communities."⁸ WHD was a modern building that followed the best and most modern approach to incarceration; *The Times* believed its architecture humanized incarcerated women and was a model for carceral institutions throughout the county. The press further praised WHD for replacing traditional "drab gray" jail uniforms⁹ with "bright-colored cambric dresses [that women] styled individually"¹⁰ and special outfits on Sunday.¹¹ Thus, WHD also mimicked the free-world by allowing incarcerated women to dress up on Sundays and make personal decisions about their style. The assistant to the Commission of Correction was proud of this seemingly liberal dress code and emphasized its uniqueness to the press.¹² From architectural design to jail uniforms, the City prioritized innovation and humanization in its approach to incarcerating women in WHD.

WHD also innovatively centered the needs of its incarcerated women by providing them with a vast array of activities and amenities. According to *The Times*, women would have access to a "large roof garden" where they could play sports, sewing classes taught by the Department of Education, and a library with 5,000 books.¹³ Another newspaper, Virginia's *New Journal and Guide*, stated that WHD also would have "a modernist chapel" with an electric organ, writing tables in each cell, "a generous supply of tiled shower rooms," and a dining room "done in green and ivory."¹⁴ The press emphasized both the large number of recreational opportunities and the size and modernness of WHD's facilities. As underscored by *New Journal and Guide*'s description of WHD having "out-of-the-ordinary equipment for the inmates' comfort," the press seemed to view WHD as too nice for a jail.¹⁵ The perception of WHD as luxurious was so great that the jail's superintendent felt compelled to defend its alleged "luxury" to reporters.¹⁶ Giving

WHD's population access to high-quality amenities appeared to be a vast improvement from how the City had treated its incarcerated women in the past. WHD had state-of-the-art facilities and was unusually designed to provide immense comfort and support to its incarcerated women.

The promise that WHD would be a center for rehabilitation also came directly from the New York City politicians who spearheaded its construction. At WHD's cornerstone laying ceremony in April 1930, Mayor Jimmy Walker declared that the new jail would be "the most humane building ever constructed in the city."¹⁷ The mayor employed a hyperbole to demonstrate that protecting incarcerated women's humanity was a central tenet and goal of WHD. Similarly, the Correction Commissioner Richard Patterson said that WHD would "study the mental, physical and emotional characteristics of each offender and treat her according to her individual needs."¹⁸ WHD would not be a site of punishment. Rather, it would be one of rehabilitation that provided holistic and targeted treatment for each woman who entered its doors. New York City politicians promised the public that WHD was designed to, and would, improve the lives of its incarcerated population.

However, less than three decades after these promises and WHD's praised opening, the New York City Mayor, Manhattan Borough President, and Correction Commissioner all supported a plan to shut it down due to inhumane conditions. In 1958, Correction Commissioner Anna M. Kross said that WHD was "a disgrace and a shame."¹⁹ Five years later, in 1963, Kross led the press on a tour through WHD to reveal its horrendous conditions, which she largely blamed on overcrowding, to the public. During the tour, incarcerated women angrily "screamed" out about WHD's problems; one woman said the building was infested with roaches to the extent that they climbed into her ears, while another one stated that "big rats" came into her cell at night.²⁰ Kross, while referencing a few bookcases in a small room, told reporters, "This is

supposed to be a library. Can you imagine that?”²¹ This was the same “library” that *The Times* had praised in 1932.²² Kross made similar disparaging comments about the previously applauded sewing lessons and roof activities that WHD claimed it would offer to its incarcerated population before it opened. Kross summed up her view of WHD when she said, “This is a horrible place. I can hardly bear to visit it.”²³ WHD was such “a horrible place” that a woman chose to plead guilty to a *felony* and serve a *minimum* sentence of 18th months in a state prison over pleading guilty to a *misdemeanor* and serving a *maximum* sentence of 12 months in WHD.²⁴ This woman decided to extend her time behind bars to ensure she would not spend any time in WHD. Within decades of its opening, both government officials and the public believed WHD had failed to deliver on its promise of being a modern, humane jail.

A 1965 investigation of WHD, carried out by Governor Rockefeller’s Special Commissioner in Charge of Investigations Herman T. Stichman, revealed that WHD’s problems were widespread. Stichman’s investigation included interviews with 37 incarcerated women while they were under oath; it was in-depth and reliable.^{25, 26} Stichman found there was “unbearable overcrowding, rodents, vermin, . . . cockroaches in other food, inadequate medical attention, inadequate recreational facilities, [and] inadequate educational facilities.”²⁷ Women in WHD were in dirty, unsanitary, dangerous, and inhumane conditions. Most types of amenities were insufficient and did not serve their designated purposes. The “comforts” of WHD, described by *New Journal and Guide* in 1932, disappeared in just three decades.²⁸ Stichman’s investigation revealed that WHD’s problems extended beyond those simply caused by overcrowding. The design and operational structure of WHD itself was unable to fulfill its stated mission of respecting its incarcerated population’s humanity and centering rehabilitation.

Joseph Kottler, the Chairman of the Committee on Penal Institutions in the New York State Assembly, further warned the public that simply building a bigger version of WHD would not solve its inadequacies. In an April 1965 “Letter to the Editor” of *The Times*, Kottler wrote,

It is [an] indisputable fact that even if the overcrowding [in WHD] were relieved, as it has been in part, the women’s prison is still a medieval monument to long-discarded theories of penology. We need no urban Alcatraz... There is but one solution: the prison should be torn down and... minimum security, open type, cottage-style [facilities] provided where proper... rehabilitation can be employed.²⁹

In line with Stichman’s findings, Kottler underscored that overcrowding was not the root cause of WHD’s inhumane conditions. Rather, its architectural design, intense focus on security, and embracement of outdated approaches to incarceration and punishment caused WHD to be a “blot on the conscience of New York.”³⁰ Building another, yet larger, high-security prison that would still keep women in closed cells would lead to a repeat of WHD’s problems and result in failure. Kottler believed that incarcerated women would only be treated humanely if the government constructed a jail with a vastly different layout and operational approach than WHD.

In an effort to embrace this ideology, New York City officially closed WHD in June 1971 and replaced it with the \$24.2 million Correctional Institution for Women (CIFW) on Rikers Island. The deputy superintendent of WHD expressed excitement about CIFW because the women would “now have a broad view of... the sky.” Similarly, the Chairman of the Board of Correction William Vanden Hevel said the institution’s design, which included cells with large horizontal windows facing the East River and brightly painted walls, “was an attempt... to free inmates of the feeling that they were behind bars.”³¹ It seemed that CIFW, unlike WHD, would try to adhere to the “open type” facility for which Kottler had advocated.³² Even more so, for the construction of CIFW, the Department of Correction “departed from conventional correctional procedures” and had students from the Parsons School of Design “assist in seeking new ideas

and techniques for a modern environmental approach to rehabilitation.”³³ The Department of Correction desperately wanted to ground CIFW in a non-restrictive, rehabilitation-focused approach, so it sacrificed protocol to ensure those tenets were incorporated into CIFW’s architecture. The Department of Correction carefully sought innovative ways to ensure that rehabilitative practices and incarcerated women’s needs would rule the new jail.

Both government officials and the press praised the CIFW’s opening, echoing language used decades earlier to describe WHD. Chairman Hevel stated that CIFW was as “modern [as] possible.”³⁴ This description of CIFW is almost identical to the previously quoted 1931 statement by *The Times* that WHD incorporated “as much thought on modern penology [that it] could bear.”³⁵ Modernity again served as a guarantee for the success of the new women’s jail. At CIFW’s dedication ceremony, Correction Commissioner George F. McGrath called the new institution, “New York’s newest and perhaps best hotel.” This hyperbole is reminiscent of the aforementioned one used by Mayor Walker during WHD’s cornerstone laying ceremony in April 1930.³⁶ Although referring to different carceral institutions, both hyperboles underscored that New York City’s new jail would center the humanity of its incarcerated women. Moreover, just as *The Times* likened WHD to a “better-class apartment building” in 1931,³⁷ it described CIFW as a “gleaming” facility that “has the look much more of a prosperous junior college than a jail” in 1971.³⁸ The press perceived both jails to be homey and luxurious. CIFW was applauded by the government and press, just as WHD had been 30 years earlier.

Similarly, the press echoed the examples and arguments it had used in promoting WHD to suggest that CIFW was a model women’s jail. For instance, to explain why CIFW would be humane and rehabilitative, *The Times* listed CIFW’s countless amenities and recreational activities.³⁹ The paper attributed CIFW’s college-feel to its tennis courts, “secluded gardens,”

beauty parlor, gym, middle school, high school, and “the most modern of kitchens.”⁴⁰ The press used a similar list in the 1930s when praising WHD.^{41,42} Moreover, like it had with WHD, *The Times* highlighted the new jail’s modernity, educational opportunities, and vast programming to argue it was a model jail. *The Times* also focused on the niceness of the cells to underscore the humanity of CIFW; it reported that incarcerated women would live in “color-coordinated... private rooms” that had a “throw rug on the floor” and unbarred windows.⁴³ This description is reminiscent of the previously cited March 1932 article in which *The Times* called WHD’s cells “rooms” and emphasized their homeyness and open windows.⁴⁴ The press praised WHD and CIFW for similar reasons. Like WHD, it heralded CIFW as a progressive, humane institution that was conducive to rehabilitation.

However, the government’s promises about CIFW and the press’ positive attitude towards it only lasted a few years. In June 1975, *The Times* ran a story with the headline, “Prisoner’s Death Laid to Poor Care.”⁴⁵ The article described how a 29-year-old “female drug addict,” who had previously alerted jail staff that she was feeling sick, was found dead in her cell. This incident occurred in June 1974, just three years after CIFW’s praised opening. The Board of Correction, composed of nine civilians, directly blamed CIFW for the woman’s death, implicating both CIFW’s procedures and personnel. In its report, the Board found her death a result of “failures to do more than the minimum required to put oneself out on behalf of another.”⁴⁶ A complete disregard for the incarcerated woman’s humanity and needs led to her avoidable death; despite its 1971 promises, CIFW was not providing care and rehabilitation to its incarcerated population. Even more so, a month after this article ran, *The Times* reported that “prison experts... rate [CIFW] little better” than WHD.⁴⁷ Rather than disrupting traditional and inhumane practices of incarceration, which Department of Correction officials claimed CIFW

would do, the new jail reinforced them. As a result, Mayor Edward Koch called for its replacement in 1983.⁴⁸ CIFW's intentional architecture, diverse programming, educational opportunities, and outdoor access perpetuated the same problems that existed in WHD. Like its predecessor, CIFW failed to keep its promises. It was neither a humane jail nor one focused on rehabilitation.

In June 1988, New York City replaced CIFW with The Rose M. Singer Center (Rosie's), pitching it as a humane and modern facility that had fixed the problems of CIFW. The City named the new jail after an original Board of Correction member who had dedicated much of her time to helping incarcerated women.⁴⁹ The Department of Correction built Rosie's on Rikers Island for about \$100 million, around four times the cost of CIFW. In the opening sentence of its June 1988 newsletter, the Department called Rosie's a "state-of-the-art jail."⁵⁰ Once again, government officials prided their new carceral institution on being magnificently modern and nice. Mayor Koch even said, "This looks like Great Neck," when referring to Rosie's design at its dedication ceremony.⁵¹ His remark echoed those made by previous city officials at the opening of WHD and CIFW, which were detailed earlier in this paper. Similar to CIFW, the government built Rosie's to provide outdoor spaces to its incarcerated population. Its new security methods enabled incarcerated women to access "mini yards" throughout the entire day.⁵² Moreover, according to *Daily News*, it had "an impressive array of outdoor recreation areas."⁵³ Rosie's was seemingly designed to maximize the time its incarcerated women could spend outdoors. The government constructed Rosie's using a modern approach to architecture and incarceration, which allegedly functioned to facilitate rehabilitation.

Rosie's, like its predecessors, also offered a variety of activities and facilities to promote rehabilitation among its incarcerated women. It had a "modern" nursery, so incarcerated mothers

could be with their babies.⁵⁴ Additionally, Rosie's offered job training programs in sewing, cooking, horticulture, cosmetology, and computer science.^{55, 56} At its 1988 dedication ceremony, Correction Commissioner Richard J. Koehler called these programs "innovative" and "a significant accomplishment."⁵⁷ The City claimed it had uniquely designed Rosie's and its programming opportunities to benefit its incarcerated population. Warden Robert Brennan further underscored this rehabilitation-focused approach when he said shortly after Rosie's opening, "This facility is built with the inmates in mind... Everything here—from recirculated outside air to... programs in cooperation with the Board of Education—is geared towards helping the women readjust when they leave."⁵⁸ The architecture, educational opportunities, job training programs, and every other aspect of Rosie's was meticulously curated to rehabilitate its incarcerated population. Like WHD and CIFW, the government promoted Rosie's as a humane, modern jail that would reform and aid its occupants.

However, within three months of its opening, Rosie's experienced immense challenges and was unable to deliver much of its praised programming. In September 1988, *Daily News* reported that the expanded capacity of Rosie's, which had about 800 beds more than CIFW, was "woefully inadequate" for the large number of women who were entering the facility. As a result, the celebrated nursery could not function, as the jail needed its space for additional cells, and the incarcerated women's outdoor access decreased from the planned five hours a day to just one hour.⁵⁹ Warden Brennan described Rosie's services as "strained."⁶⁰ Shortly after its opening, government officials were no longer praising Rosie's as a model women's jail. Like its predecessors, Rosie's was on the path towards failure.

As more time passed, Rosie's problems worsened and intensified. In 1998, a correction officer beat a partially-nude, 17-year-old incarcerated woman on the floor. The beating occurred

in the presence of two correction supervisors who did not intervene, suggesting Rosie's had a culture of violent abuse.⁶¹ In 2002, five women sued New York City with claims that staff at Rosie's forced them to undergo gynecological exams and Pap smears.⁶² A few years later, a guard pleaded guilty to raping a woman incarcerated in Rosie's.⁶³ Although this was the first time a guard was convicted of such a crime, there had been allegations of sexual abuse by guards in preceding years.⁶⁴ Most recently, in 2017, the City gave two women \$1.2 million to settle a lawsuit that claimed a guard at Rosie's had repeatedly raped them and that the facility had a "pervasive culture of rape."⁶⁵ As a result of countless reports of abuse and neglect in Rosie's and other facilities on Rikers Island, the New York City Council voted in 2019 to close all Rikers Island jails by 2026. However, the facilities and treatment of women at Rosie's was so horrendous that, in 2020, the granddaughter of Rose M. Singer wrote an op-ed in *The Times* urging the city to expedite the institution's closure.⁶⁶ Imitating WHD's timeline, within about three decades of its praised opening, the government decided to close Rosie's due to abhorrent and inhumane conditions. Rosie's, too, failed to keep its promise of helping and rehabilitating its incarcerated women, becoming a site of violence.

The histories of WHD, CIFW, and Rosie's teach the modern observer that New York City has always failed to deliver its promise of creating a humane women's jail. This pattern suggests that its hopes for WCJ will also fall short in practice. At each jail's opening, the government prided itself on – and the press praised – the new institution's modernity, architecture, vast programming opportunities, and focus on rehabilitation. After a relatively short period of time, however, conditions within each jail turned inhumane, problems arose, and the government closed the carceral institution. If WCJ opens, history may repeat itself for the fourth time; it makes claims similar to those of its predecessors about why it will be a humane and

rehabilitative jail. Just as Correction Commissioner Patterson stated that WHD would “treat... each offender... according to her individual needs,”⁶⁷ WCJ will have “individualized care plans.”⁶⁸ Similar to how CIFW had a “modern” nursery so its incarcerated women could be with their babies,⁶⁹ WCJ claims it will prioritize family visiting hours.⁷⁰ While the Warden of Rosie’s said that “everything here is geared towards helping the women readjust when they leave,”⁷¹ WCJ’s architects promise that its staff will use a “social work mindset” to ensure “effective rehabilitation.”⁷² Although there are differences between WCJ and its predecessors, the arguments for why WCJ will be a success are eerily similar to those made by New York City to justify the construction of WHD, CIFW, and Rosie’s. New York City should learn from its history of women’s jails and not build WCJ.

Notes

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- ⁷ “Segregation Plan at New Two Million Dollar Prison for Women Is Spiked by Protest,” *New Journal and Guide*, April 9, 1932, <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest-com.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/historical-newspapers/segregation-plan-at-new-two-million-dollar-prison/docview/567104354/se-2?accountid=10226>.
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- ²² “Women’s House of Detention,” *The New York Times*.
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- ²⁴ Jack Roth, “New Women’s Jail Ordered Speeded: Felony Plea to Avoid City Jail Prompts Inquiry,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 1963, <http://ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-womens-jail-ordered-speeded/docview/116351832/se-2?accountid=10226>.
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